CHAPTER 6

A Biblical Theology of Evil

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The ancient Israelites, who present themselves as the core of the biblical narrative, arose as a self-conscious people around the middle of the second millennium (1500) BCE. Their story continues as the story of the Hebrew Bible until 500 BCE. For that 1,000 years, they seem to have had little interest in devising an explanation about how evil got into the world. Not until they encountered Babylonian and Zoroastrian mythic philosophy about such issues as creation and the problem of evil did they attempt to add such accounts to their literary heritage. Then they borrowed their explanations from Mesopotamian myths and rewrote them into stories in which their own God, Yahweh or Elohim, figured as the primary mover and shaker. That all happened as they were trying to formulate the legends that explained their concept of history from Abraham back to the beginning of the world.

Thus, during their sojourn in Babylon during the sixth century BCE, they began to work out these kinds of problems and record them near the beginning of their sacred scriptures. Before 500 BCE, they seemed to have had some kind of code for their behavior but no formal explanation of evil. They certainly noticed that some people did not follow the established or idealized code of conduct for Israelites, but that really only prompted them to scold each other a lot. The kings scolded the people, and the people scolded each other and the kings when they thought they could get away with it. The prophets scolded everything that moved, so to speak, and they kept right on doing it until the Lord shut their mouths about 500 BCE. Moreover, prophets were constantly scolding each other; and everybody who was scolding anybody constantly appealed to God as their judge; and if we can take the

prophets at their word, God was scolding everybody who did not seem to be getting enough scolding already. Sometimes God outright threatened the daylights out of people who were thought to be misbehaving.

Sometime at or after the turn into the fifth century BCE, as they developed their proliferating notions of apocalyptic Judaism, the Jewish scholars made a couple of early attempts to explain the theology of evil. Both proved in the end to be false starts, but they remained in the official canon of sacred scripture nonetheless. As intimated in Chapter 1, the earliest one appears in Genesis 6 and is an old legend that appeared in many forms and places in the ancient Mesopotamian world. The second one to be developed is placed earlier in the Bible, in Genesis 3. It too is simply copied from an ancient fertility cult story and turned into the explanation of how things got wicked in God's good world.

It is interesting that God's people needed to borrow some pagan stories to solve the problem of the source of evil. The first story blames God, and the second story blames humans. That is probably why there are two. There were two different general strains of apocalyptic theology developing in Second Temple Judaism in the fifth century, and they both wanted to get their oar in on this exciting speculation about the origin of evil.

That first story, in Genesis 6, claims that evil came into this world, rather benignly, from the heavenly realm. The Elohim—that is, demigods or angels—descended to earth, saw how beautiful and sexy human women are, and took them as wives. Seems like a rather natural thing to do. The result was pregnancy and the birth of a race of giants who taught men how to devise implements of agriculture and war, while teaching women the use of cosmetics so as to be even more seductive. This apparently produced a great deal of conflict and turbulence on earth. God was so upset by all this that eventually the answer was to kill a lot of people with the flood.

Analyzing this explanation of evil gives the impression that there were two issues that turned a rather understandable drama into a source of evil. First, the heavenly beings apparently lusted after the women, that is, there is something about sex that can get you into trouble. Second, the heavenly beings crossed a boundary that is supposed to be inviolable (i.e., the boundary between things divine and things human, the heavenly and the earthly). In any case, it is clear that the humans are essentially without fault and not the source of evil. Evil comes from a decision and act of God's heavenly agents according to this line of thought. They fouled up this planet with their lust and irresponsibility. God and his minions are to blame for evil. That is the full explanation and that is all there is to it, according to Genesis 6.

Obviously, there were those Jewish scholars at and after 500 BCE who were inclined to defend God against this accusation. They wanted to protect God at all cost, sort of like an abused child wants to protect the parent at all cost, because if the parent is bad what does the child have left? That means that where

he or she is plugged into the universe, things are flawed. Hence, it shapes the child's own image of self. The scholars trying to protect God wanted to write a theodicy that kept God pristine and perfect, even if they needed to blame humans, indeed themselves, for the rise of evil in this world. So they found an old fertility myth in Babylon and turned it into the fall story in Genesis 3.

What a really dumb idea, because that does not get God off the hook. Either the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God, who is the creator and cause behind everything, caused evil or he let it happen. He willed it or did not will its prevention. He permitted it, at least. There are no other options. In either case the issue goes all the way back to God. As President Harry Truman said, "The buck stops with the big guy."

The mythic story of the fall of human beings into the prideful sin of disobedience, presented by the Hebrew Scriptures in Genesis 3, is intensely intriguing from many points of view. Whether it is understood literally, metaphorically, mythically, or symbolically, the story provokes a spontaneous and universal sense of its authenticity. It is one of those stories that carries with it such archetypal quality that we sense at once how it touches at the center, a generic truth of obvious humanness and of vital personal experience. It speaks of the radical and tragic distance between what we can imagine as our finest potential as persons, and what we know as our often defeating and dissonant experiences in real life. The story says we are broken, and life's experience makes that seem like a deep and central truth, whether God caused it or God permitted it, or our willful pursuit of bad courses of action is just typical of us apparently flawed humans.

One reason this story is always intriguing arises from the way the archaic Mesopotamian sources of this legend are woven into a narrative about Israel's God. The formal elements present here, derived as they are from the much more ancient primordial myth, include the role of the virgin, the tree, the fruit, the phallic serpent as tempter, and the like. These are all imported with little alteration from ancient fertility literature. Though the story is not explicitly sexual, as we find it in the Hebrew Bible, it is the story of a contest between two potential lovers for the allegiance of the virgin: God and God's Adversary. Thus we have a double seduction. The phallic serpent seduces Eve, and Eve seduces Adam. This framework for the story carries the sexual overtones of the original story in Genesis 1:27 over into Genesis 2–3. In Genesis 3, of course, the narrative includes the response of guilt and shame regarding sexual vulnerability.

The story is equally intriguing for the manner in which the Hebrew editors attempted to adapt it for use in their religion. Their key difference from the Mesopotamian myth is the obvious literary effort invested here to make the story fit into Israelite theological ideology, and to make it reveal something essential about the manner in which Israel's God, Yahweh, relates to the impaired universe and the fractured human community.

THE FUNCTION OF THE STORY

Related to this is the implication in the story of the general problem of evil. Clearly, this foreign literary material is inserted into the fabric of the Hebrew scripture to service Israel's theology. It establishes a baseline for dealing with the problem of evil as humans suffer it. The claim is unquestionably made here that a hubristic egotism led humans beyond their appropriate domain and landed them in such an erroneous perspective that God's design for nature, for our sense of the presence of God, and for interpersonal relationships seemed seriously disturbed. The flowering shrubs began to look like thorn bushes, the walks with God began to look dangerous and something to hide from, and the complexity of human relationships began to look like thickets of unsortable confusion and pain.

The fall story tries hard to account for the problem of human pain and universal disorder in the world. It attempts to explain why humans can conceive of aesthetic ideals but can hardly create them, can long for a perfect world but not fashion one, can hope for genuine love but seldom express or experience it, and can remember and anticipate paradise yet sense that it always eludes us.

This is an intensely pathetic story of loss, grief, guilt, and shame. The pathos of the story is significant in revealing the essential nature of the universal human predicament, whether the story is understood as history or as myth. The literary characteristics clearly establish, of course, that it should be viewed as a mythical section of the Bible. It is so invested with confessional theological content that it is profoundly true in what it says about our fractured humanness. Myth is a confessional statement that is usually truer than mere historical reporting could ever possibly be. The truth it articulates is that of the general state of the flawedness and incompleteness of human nature and the material world. It describes the sense of the wrongness of things within and between us as humans. We all experience this. It is expressed in the pervading dysfunction and anxiety that afflict us all.

So the story is a theological myth, imported into the sacred canon from pagan sources by the Hebrew believers, for the purpose of describing the psychological state of affairs they perceived to afflict humanity. They saw themselves and the human race as alienated, orphaned, and diseased. They were, of course, quite correct. St. Paul described it succinctly: "We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

The story depicts a cosmic paradigm for general human psychological development. It describes a crucial stage in human growth from the childlikeness of Eden to mature work in building God's reign of love and grace in this world. This narrative represents the adolescent move from human naïveté to humans taking social and cultural responsibility in God's world. It is not a story about a fall down, but of humans stumbling up the stairs to a new level of maturation and functionality. In that growth process, the

story describes, for the human race, the development equivalent to the individual growth process of birth and adolescent disengagement. It tells us how humankind decided to grow up, from the cradle of the Garden, to move forward to building the Holy City.

The personal separation experiences of birth and adolescence are normally fraught with a good deal of anxiety. That anxiety is also evident in the story of the fall, as we observe the reaction of Adam and Eve. There is significant anxiety there, regarding the presence of the forbidden tree, the perception of the possibility of making a wrong decision, the appearance of the sexual symbol of the tempting serpent, the offer of the seduction of Eve, her offer of seduction to Adam, the threat of death, and the guilt and shame of cutting loose from God. The whole fabric is expressive of intense adolescent anxiety.

In fact, the most interesting element is the plain implication of an important and dangerous state of anxiety existing in the life and spirit of Adam and Eve before the fall, when paradise was presumably still intact. The recognition of significant anxiety before the fall is crucial for insight into essential human nature as seen by the ancient Hebrews. It implies the need in Adam, as he was created, for an anxiety reduction mechanism that would make it possible for him to cope and to open up the door of his primitive and childlike life to real growth. He experienced this need in terms of his growth-oriented nature and destiny.

As soon as God announced the presence and import of the forbidden tree, a state of anxiety existed in terms of Adam's perception that his potential destiny was open-ended and required decision making by him and Eve. He recognized that he possessed the potential for change and for negative or positive growth. The anxiety increased in intensity as the story recounts Adam and Eve struggling with the essential decision about their unknown and challenging future. Moreover, the pressure of that anxiety is further increased as they contemplate, quite correctly, the possibility of being like God, knowing both good and evil.

It should not surprise us that the story describes Eden as anxiety laden. Nor should we shrink from the implied fact that anxiety is not a part of our brokenness but an essential element of our natures, and of the fact that we are not fully evolved. Thus, the problem of evil becomes significantly more complex. Stress in the pre-fall state, as described in this theological myth, is already evident much earlier. Adam is described as finding himself alone in the garden in a state of sufficient disequilibrium that he looked for a mate or companion among the animals. He found none adequate or appropriate. God noted the stress and anxiety, and intervened by creating Eve as a help appropriate to his neediness. Obviously, that means that she filled out some condition of lack and anguish in Adam and thereby reduced his stress and anxiety.

One can imagine that Adam had considerable stress from numerous directions in Eden: from the pressure of responsibility to keep the garden, to find companionship that was appropriate, to name the animals, and to fashion a meaningful relationship with his wife, who ultimately chose a liberation course of independence from him and then seduced him into following her, presumably lest he lose her. Then he had anxiety about his responsibility to obey and love God in a world where the manner of doing that held considerable ambiguity. So what is the source of evil? If it is the evil that humans do to each other, is it not preset by the way God fashioned humans and their world?

The man was under pressure. His anxiety is not a consequence of his sin. It is clearly the consequence of his being a person with unexplored potentials and possibilities. It is inherent to his nature and all human nature. It is inevitable to human existence, because of the nature of the potential for growth, and of the unfolding unknown that is inherent to growth. The Hebrews saw that and related it to the potential in the world for the problem of evil. So they told the old Mesopotamian story in a new way and captured so precisely a truth generic to our existence that when we read the story 5,000 or 6,000 years later, we find it touching the center of our predicament in some fundamental ways.

The story urges that all this stress and anxiety that Adam experienced were finally culminated in the enigma of what to do about the possibility of being like God. The story of the fall, as the Hebrews understood it, describes the event and the decision as Adam's anxiety reduction move, designed to free his psyche for further function, coping, and growth. The critical question, therefore, must be raised as to whether the event was a constructive or destructive anxiety reduction procedure for Adam and the human race, as the Hebrews saw it. How does that relate to the onset of the problem of evil? Is evil merely human dysfunction, and does that arise exclusively out of the choices we make in reducing the stress of life?

We ask the same question when we consider whether the painful process of birth and adolescent disengagement is a constructive or destructive anxiety reduction experience. It is important because it will give us some clues as to whether we are to look at human alienation, pain, and anxiety and their consequences as difficult but inevitable stages in the evolution of persons and the human race, or as an unfortunate aberration of a sinful, destructive type of behavior, and the source of the problem of evil, as the Hebrews suggested.

SAYING NO AND YES TO GOD

I am persuaded that the story of the fall is a metaphor of the human process of maturing to individuality and responsible agency as individuated

persons. The story is a report on the human psychological process of asserting the will of the human person against the will of God. To do so is a necessary act for humans because saying "yes" to God has no meaning or content if it is impossible to say "no" to God. To be a committed biblical believer and a builder of God's kind of world, one needs to be an independent agent who can commit to that kind of vocation. It is no different for the human race than it is for a child moving through adolescence in relationship to his or her parents. Adolescence is supposed to be a time for individuation from parents, disengagement from dependency, and assertion of one's own ego, so as to test and find one's own authentic identity and personal style.

Maturity for humans requires the ego strength and will that forge the power to disengage from authority, in order to give significance to the intent and behavior of commitment to freely chosen relationships. The story of the fall in Genesis 2–3 assumes that adolescent disengagement requires a willful aggressive act, testing one's own strength over against one's parents, against general authority, against God's requirements, or against any pressures toward conformity. This is necessary so that the person can authentically choose, as an independent agent, to conform willingly to God's will and way. Without this adolescent disengagement, there can be no growth and no later adult refusion with parents or authorities as friends, peers, colleagues, or compatriots. This is as true in our relationship with God as it is with our parents.

Childhood is a stage of fusion with parents. It moves progressively toward differentiation of individual persons, and moves toward that contest and contrast in adolescence. Once the differentiation is successfully established and genuine individuality is achieved, there follows a process of return toward union, commitment, cherishing, and a new kind of fusion. In this sense, the myth of the fall represents a growth step of such disengagement, in preparation for devoted commitment to godliness. It is of great interest that the ancient Hebrews saw this transitional process as a very precarious stage in which the act or the style of the act could produce the problem of evil and alienation from God and the good. If Adam and Eve were not wrong in declaring their independence, they were wrong in doing it as a revolution rather than as a maturing evolution, the Hebrews thought. So also with adolescents in our human processes!

Thus, it is not quite clear whether the story of the fall is intended to describe a step taken in the best possible manner, even if it was a necessary step. Human development, individually and communally, is a continuum of evolutionary process and progress. What are usually thought to be negative aspects of human development are often constructive stages of maturing. In this perspective, the fall story can be seen for just what it is: a mythic or analogic story. Although it comments in interesting and entertaining metaphors upon glitches in the evolutionary process of maturation, it does not comment

in any meaningful way upon the real steps of that human process. What it does say is that the human odyssey is a tragic adventure and the source or matrix for the problem of evil.

In this model, humans move more or less consistently along the growth line from primitivity, or childhood, to maturity, without the sort of negative psychological and historical discontinuity that the fall story is usually taken to represent. It is depicted as a revolutionary break from our divinely intended style and destiny. The admittedly painful adolescent disengagement is inherently necessary to achieving responsible individual agency. That is how persons take constructive action in life. The fall was not down, but upward to the status of builders of culture, history, and a godly world. This myth moves the process of this planet from a nursery in the mythic garden of Eden to the achievement of the Holy City, a myth about the maturation of the historical process.

It is useful, nonetheless, to ask whether, as a character in a mythic story, Adam might have done it in a better way. Was his anxiety reduction process really constructive or destructive, pragmatically considered? Does humanity, or do persons, need to express so much disjunction and experience so much alienation and loss in order to achieve personhood and growth—a sense of our true selves? Or does this inevitably produce the problem of evil and human suffering as its consequence?

It is tempting to say that Adam chose the best course and, in view of his limited knowledge and experience, the only one he really had available. If this produced a problem of evil or suffering, it was simply inherent and inevitable to the natural process. Agreed. That is a way of saying that the loss and alienation we all experience in the expulsion from the womb and in adolescent individuation are virtually inevitable. Its problems and pain are built into the system. That suggests that the consequent internal and social distortions these bring, which drive our sickness and our sin, are not wholly avoidable in real life.

As we grow, we have limited knowledge, inadequate experience, and immature levels of wisdom. These frequently cause us to choose painful and alienating courses. Our decisions often alienate us from others, from God, and from our own clear sense of our selves. So our dysfunction and the interpersonal or social damage it brings are part of the process of growth in a world that God created free. That suggests that God is not the cause or the problem of evil, but that the evil humans do to each other is the price God was willing to pay to insure that the world was free to grow. Growth and change come mainly by exploration and experimentation. Where there is freedom, there will be errors. In a system where there are no errors, there is no freedom.

This model manages most of the real-life data rather well. It implies that humans are in the process of evolving. That implies that at any given

moment, we are inadequately evolved, individually and communally. Therefore, change is the objective toward which we drive. Change always brings the pain of losing what was before. Hence, pain is inevitable. No alternative ever existed, nor can ever exist. The choice of being responsible agents, shaping our own painful evolution, could not have been different for Adam in the story and cannot be different for us today in real life. This is the best of all worlds, because it is a world in which we are free to become our full true selves. There is no other way out of our primitive childlike naïveté in the Eden womb into the growth and maturation of whole personhood. Some persons get stuck in the transitional alienation phase. This may result from genetic, biochemical, or situational reasons. Such folks do a lot of damage to the rest of us. Social psychology research on prison populations, for example, demonstrated that 80% of the prisoners suffer from some form of genetically inherited psychotic or schizoid disorder.

It is interesting, therefore, and very clear, that the formulators of the ancient Hebrew story intended to explain the problem of evil and human disorder by asserting that humanity made a bad choice in the Garden of Eden. They were sure it had a permanent and pervasive effect. This does not imply that some decisive act by Adam to move him from naïveté to maturity was not necessary. Neither does it mean that nothing constructive toward real growth came out of Adam's decision. It only contends that his decision was a transitional act unnecessarily fraught with a self-defeating price: rebellion and alienation. The Hebrews saw it as a destructive anxiety reduction mechanism, insofar as they sensed it in those terms.

One can posit the notion, as the ancient Hebrews did, that the fall story represents such a destructive move that paradigmatically explains the disorder and alienation in humans. Then the story describes an essentially destructive and self-defeating response to the generic anxiety of birth and differentiation. That would represent it as a dysfunctional response to our responsibility for choosing our personal destinies. Even so, that would not erase the fact that the fall has constructive, freedom-affording results for humankind. Similarly, adolescence may be handled unnecessarily rebelliously by some teenagers but lead out to a growth process that results in profoundly healthy relationships with parents, authorities, and traditions later on. Paul seems to imply something of this regarding humanity when he ties the naïve primordial state of human bliss in Eden to a continuum that leads from paradise to fallen humanity in Genesis 3, and then on to fruition in the believer as a new person in Christ. Paul believed that to be the true destiny of all humanity.

The fall story represents one option for implementing the necessary and inevitable differentiation process of self-actualization. If the Hebrews thought of it as a destructive option and the source of evil in the world, the implication is that Adam might have exercised an equally growth-inducing act of will and ego strength had he chosen, for independent and personal

reasons, to affirm God's will and value system, and not eat of the tree of knowledge. Would that have been as initiatory, independent, and effectively disengaging an act toward growth as disobedience proved to be? Would it have had adequately self-affirming, though less self-defeating, consequences? If so, the paradigmatic import for human history is that the distortion, pain, alienation, and sickness with which humans have responded to our choice of destiny throughout history were not inevitable elements of the growth process of the race. That is apparently what the ancient Hebrews thought. However, what should this mythic figure, Adam, have done about the choice of facing the issues of both good and evil in life? Adam, of course, symbolizes each of us. How can we move beyond naïveté to face reality if we shut our eyes to the problem of evil? Adam marched forward boldly and took it on. Good for him.

Humans have made many bad decisions: in the way we have apprehended God's real disposition toward us, in the way we have responded to the quandary and ambiguity of life, and in the degree of finesse with which we have processed our own psychological dynamics, development, and destiny. The ancient Hebrews were claiming in their story that such decisions can be made more wisely, redemptively, and faithfully, and with healthier consequences. Evil is the damage we do to each other and ourselves by our distance from God's will and way. Perhaps so, but I think the pain of life is just an inevitable consequence of the experiment of human development in a system built on the grace of free choice.

Comparably, it is possible, I suppose, that the disengaging adolescent can achieve health and growth while choosing, as an independent act of will and ego, to affirm and follow the healthful values of parents, authority, and traditions toward constructive conformity. Indeed, that course, when expressing rather than compromising the child's own authenticity, may be far less self-defeating, inefficient, erosive of health, and painful than disengagement that strains relationships or maximizes confrontation, alienation, and grief-loss. However, when I get a family into my clinic that has two children in midadolescence, and bitterly complains that one of the two is a troublesome child, self-defeating and disobedient, whereas the other one has always been a perfect child, the one I worry about most is the perfectionist child who is not engaging in the experiment of finding out who he or she is as an individual.

The story of the fall is theological mythology that confesses the meaning of human pain and disorder, as humanly induced, in the face of a gracious and provident God, who generously created and sustains us in freedom and forgiveness. However, our differentiation from a womblike relation with God is absolutely necessary. It appears that the Hebrews were correct in implying that the disengagement could be more or less self-defeating. The story suggests that such individuation could probably be done in a way that affirms the perspective and value system that heals. It need not be a decision that

aggravates generic human anxiety and sickens us. However, it seems like those are more correctly on the right track who deemphasize the cataclysmic and alienating dimension of human fallenness while placing all the emphasis on the freedom for growth that humans as independent agents need and possess. Losing paradise in the ancient story freed Adam and Eve. They accepted the price they had to pay and the blessings that they earned: sexual awareness and fruitfulness, progeny, and generations of creative farmers and city builders.

That growth model handles the data of human perplexity in a way that implies that the fall story speaks of a *revolution* and that, however paradigmatic that may be of actual human experience, humankind always has the alternative option of an *evolutionary* growth response to our generic human anxiety. It is intriguing to consider the possibility of humanity in general, and our children in particular, developing through a peaceful adolescence, a relatively nonturbulent exploration of the possibilities of being like God or like parents, knowing good and evil.

My initial outlook in wrestling with the fall story was to conclude that Adam had no alternative. I was strongly inclined to the notion that a turbulent and alienating process is inherent to adolescence and its disengagement, as it is inherent to the rather violent and painful business of being born. However, I am indebted to many years in clinical work and pastoral care for being teased out into rethinking that. The fall story, as it stands, really does represent an unnecessarily self-destructive form of adolescent rebellion.

Presumably Adam's growth and differentiation could have developed tranquilly and evolved constructively to maturity, as in healthy and cherishing adolescents. That seems clearly to be what the authors of the myth intended to say. What urged me to take a new look at the matter was the increasing success I discern in some thoughtful and considerate adolescents who assiduously refuse to give up a course of evolutionary rather than revolutionary disengagement. It seems possible for them constructively to explore the growth and maturation process with a genius for humor and humaneness, even when their parents are, betimes, less than helpful to their wholesome development.

Disengagement by evolutionary and constructive anxiety reduction seems to work for them. It struck me in thinking of this that the odyssey of Jacques Cousteau's son seems to be a good illustration of this kind of growth. Instead of running away to sea, so to speak, literally or figuratively, as so many adolescents do, he "went down to the sea in ships" with his father and found wisdom and a beautiful new world. The metaphor is somewhat tortured by his untimely death in the ocean deep.

It is intriguing, in any case, to contemplate how things might have been in human history if the state of affairs in the human psyche and spirit were such as to permit and prompt a different mythic story in Genesis 3. What if the

story could have represented humanity as reaching forward within the will of God, for individuality, maturity, and wisdom; and for knowledge of being like God in comprehending the world inside out, in knowing God as he now knows us? Cooperative growth with God and exploration of the possibilities of human destiny in tranquility do not comprise a story that rings true to the human experience of dissonance, alienation, and dis-ease. However, growth in joyful faith and trust suggests a redemptive alternate model that might have been from the beginning, if we were not so badly distorted by generic anxiety.

However, the human race was set upon the course of its experiment with destiny, without an adequate database, without adequate experience, and without a vote in the matter of our own existence in the first place. We did not choose to exist, or to launch ourselves in primitivity and ignorance, or to pursue our destiny without a light to see the next step. We did not choose to be inadequate to the responsibilities of life and the challenges of godliness.

THE IMAGE OF GOD IN FALLEN HUMANITY

If we think of the fall story and of human distortion as destructive anxiety reduction dynamics, a final significant question regarding human nature arises. In what sense do humans image God in choosing self-destructive or self-defeating courses? The human behavior of will and ego over against power and authority reflects and is possible because of an essential dimension of God's nature in humans: the function and attribute of being independent creators and independent agents of our own destiny. In the story of the fall and in the real human experience of pain, disorder, distortion, and disease, humans act as independent creators gone awry and as independent agents choosing self-defeating destinies. Those choices free us to be persons and to grow, but they decrease the focus, efficiency, and gratification of that freedom. They increase the dissonance, conflict, and erosive sense of alienation.

God, as independent agent, could also act in self-defeating ways but apparently does not because he decides not to do so. That is a credit to God's moral character as an independent moral being, not a result of his essential nature, as if he had no alternative. This reminds me of the cynic's joke: "Can God create a rock that is so heavy that God cannot lift it?" The joke has greatly entertained the superficial and cynical secularist and unduly troubled the Christian philosopher. It is to the credit of the superficial Christian and the secular philosopher, perhaps, that it troubles neither of them much, both thinking it quite absurd.

It is, however, a profound question. The answer is not the one that Christian philosophers have given, namely, that God cannot create a rock too heavy for God to lift, because that is out of keeping with God's true character. The answer, I judge, is rather that God can very well create such a rock. He can

do anything like that, or any other sort of self-defeating thing, if he chooses to do so. Moreover, he can do it without ceasing to be God, contrary to the view of some Christian philosophers. He would, of course, turn out to be a bad God in the moral sense of that term as well as in the social sense of the term. But he would not be a bad God in the ontological sense. He would still be God, and that is all that counts ontologically. In that sense, it is not different for God than for humans who are bad morally and socially because they choose self-defeating behavior but remain humans in every ontological sense.

The crucial issue here, however, is that God has not created a rock too heavy for God to lift, so to speak, and has chosen not to engage in other self-defeating behavior because he has apparently chosen to behave with inviolate moral integrity. He has chosen to be true to his own nature and destiny. He is not merely locked into an inevitable moral quality because of his essence. He is free to choose, grow, explore, experiment, decide, and fail.

He has chosen not to do so, not because of his essence, but because of his moral integrity. Therefore, because all morality is ultimately aesthetics, he has made this choice because of his aesthetic integrity, and his sensitivity to what is beautiful, comporting well with authentic coherence in his world. Hence, God decides against self-defeating behavior. That is a matter of appropriateness and proportion. He is trustworthy, not merely as a being defined by logical or ontological inevitability, but by moral agency: a being who is psychologically committed to holiness in the sense of wholeness. The God of the Bible is not a Greek God in a pantheon of abstract qualities personified in archetypal figures, but a God who chooses, acts, could err as Jesus could have in the wilderness temptations, and decides not to do so. He decides to be moral, gracious, and aesthetically appropriate.

Humans reflect the image of God in our nature by the integrity of our choices. In that, we are independent choosers; we image God and reflect his nature and moral quality. We spoil the clear quality of that imaging process when we choose inappropriateness and disproportion, and when we defeat ourselves in our growth endeavors or needs by being aesthetically inappropriate.

Such was the case of Adam, as the Hebrews saw it and reported it in the myth of the fall. Such is the case in our daily failures to make sound, wholesome, and healing choices, when we have adequate information, ability, and genetic disposition to make such choices. When we make such good choices, we usually create good results. When we make bad choices because we have inadequate information, lack of ability, or genetically preset dysfunction, we are not evil, even if our choices create pain.

When we willfully inflict damage or pain while having adequate information, ability, and genetic health to prevent it, we are the sources of the only evil that happens in the world. Humans recapitulate the fall story daily.

That is undoubtedly why we so spontaneously perceive the authenticity of that ancient myth. God is not the source of evil just because God created a world that is free, intending human and animal experimentation to pursue our potential destinies.

An early form of sections of this chapter, in which the argument was carried out in a slightly different direction, was previously published in J. Harold Ellens and Wayne G. Rollins (Eds.) (2004), "From Genesis to Apocalyptic Vision," in *Psychology and the Bible: A New Way to Read the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, Chap. 3, pp. 23–42). Westport, CT: Praeger. Copyright © 2004 by J. Harold Ellens and Wayne G. Rollins. All rights reserved. Used with permission of ABC-CLIO, LLC, Santa Barbara, CA.